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**Commission on the Status of Women**
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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: current challenges and forward-looking strategies for the advancement and empowerment of women and girls**

## Statement submitted by: Coalition against Trafficking in Women, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Coordination francaise du lobby européen des femmes, Dominican Leadership Conference, International Council of Jewish Women, Mouvement pour l'abolition de la prostitution et de la pornographie et de toutes formes de violences sexuelles et discriminations sexists, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Soroptimist International, VIVAT International, World Federation of the Ukrainian Women's Organizations, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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## Statement

We, NGOs working toward the elimination of male violence against women and realization of gender equality, reaffirm the message in the Beijing Declaration, adopted by the 4th World Conference on Women in 1995 that "violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace."

Violence against women impacts women's ability to enjoy equality and human rights. Sexual violence and exploitation continue to be among the most devastating forms of violence experienced by women and girls of all ages, and indeed have proliferated as a result of increased globalization and use of Internet technologies.

## Widespread violence against women

Over the past decade, increased globalization has often led to prioritizing profit at the expense of human rights and gender equality. Governments have contributed to this crisis by raising revenue through policies effectively normalizing and, in some places, even legalizing sexual violence and exploitation such as prostitution and pornography. The harms of sexual violence to individual women and communities that result from trafficking and sex tourism have nearly become invisible as women's and girls' bodies and sexuality have been reduced to commodities. The majority of the victims of trafficking are women and girls and most are trafficked for purposes of sexual exploitation.

Given its devastating and far-reaching impact on women and their communities, systematic rape is used as a weapon of war. In conflict areas, military forces launch attacks against the bodies of civilian women and girls. Refugees fleeing situations of armed conflict are raped in and around camps meant to protect them from further violence. Humanitarian workers and peacekeeping forces abuse their position of power vis-à-vis the local populations to sexually exploit women in war-torn areas.

## Impact of Violence Against Women

Throughout the world, women and girls are confronted with sexual violence in their homes, schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Sexual violence and its aftermath often prevent women from becoming equal participants in government, the workforce, and society. The economic impact and social stigmatization of sexual abuse are serious barriers to women's equality. A significant number of victims of sexual assault lose their jobs or are forced to quit. Those who speak up against sexual abuse in the workplace often face discrimination by employers. Even though one third of adolescent girls report that their first sexual experience was forced, rape and sexual assault are rarely prosecuted.[1] When criminal justice systems address rape, there usually is more scrutiny and blame put on the victim than the perpetrator. In some parts of the world, rape victims themselves are prosecuted. Even where rape victims are not criminalized, the social stigma of being identified as a victim of sexual abuse can lead to isolation or further violence or abuse by families and communities.

The effect of sexual abuse on the health of women around the world is enormous. Sexual violence is one of the leading factors of the spread of HIV/AIDS among women and girls. UNAIDS, UNFPA, and UNIFEM have identified gender inequality as the core cause of the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS among women and girls, citing their inability to exercise control over their bodies and their lives. Male violence and privilege prevent women and girls from making their own decisions with regard to their sexual health. According to the World Health Organization, women who have experienced physical or sexual abuse in childhood or adulthood experience more physical and psychological health problems and are more likely to be exposed to further behaviors that endanger their health than women who have not been abused. Those who experience both physical and sexual abuse are at higher risk of developing health problems generally than those who experience physical violence alone. The impact over time of multiple episodes of abuse appears to be cumulative, increasing the health consequences for the victim. The psychological effects of sexual abuse may leave women in a constant state of fear and helplessness and instill in them a feeling that their lives are worthless and meaningless.

[1] World Health Organization, *World Report on Violence and Health* (2002).

The objectives in the Beijing Platform for Action cannot be achieved while sexual violence is pervasive throughout all societies.

## Responses to Violence Against Women

During the past decade, there have been important changes in states' recognition of sexual violence and attempts to eradicate it. For instance, on the international level, states have passed the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, a wide-ranging international agreement to address the crimes and human rights violations involved in the trafficking in persons, especially women and children. The Protocol is a significant step in addressing sexual violence in that it specifically addresses the trade in human beings for purposes of the exploitation of prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation. In 2004, the UN system added the position of Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, to give further focus to trafficking in women and girls, the majority of victims in trafficking in persons. Regional efforts have likewise addressed trafficking, including the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution.

Another important international development was the inclusion of gender violence as among the crimes against humanity subject to the jurisdiction of international criminal tribunals, finally addressing sexual assault in armed conflict, a crime that had largely been ignored. Likewise, the UN's adoption of a Code of Conduct for its staff, including humanitarian aid workers, which includes a prohibition of sexual exploitation, addresses the need to protect women and girls from sexual exploitation and hold perpetrators of violence accountable, particularly following conflict and humanitarian crises.

States such as the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, and Sweden, have created legislation aimed at ending the sexual exploitation of women and girls. Laws attempting to stem the tide of trafficking in persons for purposes of sexual exploitation and the practice of sex tourism have been passed, including criminalization of perpetrators and immigration remedies for victims. Militaries are beginning to police sexual exploitation of women by their troops, both against female soldiers and civilians.

Many states have begun to address inequalities in their laws and introduce new legislation to address the problem of gender-based violence, including sexual violence, in the home and workplace. During the past decade, new domestic violence legislation has been implemented by several states to address violence against women within the family and in the home. Recognition of the problem of domestic violence has led several states to eliminate marital rape exemptions in the penal laws and to fund programs for women and their children to assist them in gaining safety from abuse in their homes.

### Recommendations

States must honor their commitment to eradicate violence against women, particularly sexual violence and exploitation, by focusing on implementation. We appeal for action in the following areas:

- Ratifying and implementing international and regional conventions that seek to eliminate violence against women, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and its Optional Protocol; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others; the Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children;

- Implementing the policies recommended by the Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery regarding sexual exploitation and gender-based violence;

- Implementing and enforcing the guidelines established by the Secretary-General's Bulletin on "Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse"[2];

- Training and accountability of institutional players at all levels, including police, judges, prosecutors and other community leaders to recognize exploited women and girls as crime victims, not as immoral or criminal;

- Strengthening laws and policies to assist victims of domestic violence, including addressing crimes of rape and sexual abuse;

- Criminalizing the perpetrators of all crimes of sexual exploitation, including buyers and procurers of prostituted and trafficked women and girls;

- Reforming laws on sentencing and admissibility of evidence in rape cases to protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable;

- Creating economic programs for women at risk of being trafficked and sexually exploited and raising awareness about the danger of trafficking;

- Adopting immigration remedies for victims of sexual violence and exploitation, including asylum and lawful residency;

- Supporting educational programs addressing the prevention of sexual violence in the broader context of gender equality, including education and empowerment for women and girls, and education on the harms of sexual violence and sexual stereotypes for men and boys;

- Rejecting the legalization or normalization of sexual violence or the lack of prosecution or enforcement of laws that attempt to hold perpetrators accountable;

- Recognizing the role of the media and the Internet in promoting sexual violence and adopting measures to combat the growing sexualization of women and girls and abuse of women and girls in the production and consumption of pornography.

A decade ago in Beijing, the global community recognized that violence against women is an obstacle to gender equality. Law and policy-makers, educators, and activists have worked hard to improve states' response to this issue, but there is much more work left to be done. Global markets profiting from exploitation of women and girls add new challenges to addressing old problems of sexual abuse. The global community must now stem the tide of a greater sense of acceptability and inevitability of sexual violence and recommit itself to the elimination of violence against women in all its forms.

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[2] ST/SGB/2003/13.